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ABSTRACT

Many writing teachers have a favorite way to configure a class, a favorite method of imparting knowledge, a preferred voice in which to speak. However, there is so much diversity among students in a writing classroom, especially a freshman writing classroom, that a writing teacher needs to take an eclectic approach and use a variety of teaching strategies, if she is to connect with all of her students. This paper considers what some well-known compositionists have written about teaching writing, among them George Hillocks, David Foster, and Anthony Gregorc. The paper also finds that the work of Howard Gardner (with his multiple intelligences theory) validates the need for an eclectic composition pedagogy, as does the work of Isabel Briggs Myers, a scholar who believes there are 16 personality types. It contends that to teach writing effectively a teacher needs to use an array of methods because effective writing requires competence in such a wide variety of creative, social, and cognitive processes. The paper points out that writing teachers are charged with the responsibility of teaching all students, regardless of their personality, learning style, or dominant intelligences, to write competently. It concludes that to discharge this responsibility, composition teachers need a variety of teaching strategies. Lists 11 works cited. (NKA)

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An Eclectic Approach to the Teaching of Writing.

by Derek Soles

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CS 511 918

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An Eclectic Approach to the Teaching of Writing

Writing teachers have an array of methods and techniques for interacting with students. We can interact with a whole class, encourage students to interact with each other in small groups, tutor students individually. We can lecture, ask questions, generate discussion, facilitate group work, stage a debate, show a movie, organize a field trip. We can speak to our students in the voice of a drill sergeant, a cheerleader, a coach, a mentor, a guide. Many writing teachers have a favorite way to configure a class, a favorite method of imparting knowledge, a preferred voice in which to speak. But should we not speak in many voices, at different times, in different ways, to all of our students together, some of our students in groups, and each of our students as individuals? There is so much diversity among students in a writing classroom—especially a freshman writing classroom—that a writing teacher needs to take an eclectic approach and use a variety of teaching strategies, if she is to connect with all of her students.

Not everyone agrees. Some writing teachers think that lecturing in a waste of valuable time that could be spent actually planning, drafting and revising a text, perhaps with input from peers and the teacher. Hillocks reviewed the research on four methods of teaching writing and concludes that the "presentational mode…dominated by lecture and teacher-led discussion about the characteristics of good writing" (194) is the least effective method. More effective are the natural process and the individualized modes. The natural process mode is "characterized by freewriting about whatever interests the

students, feedback from peer groups and the teacher, and opportunities to revise or redraft in light of peer or instructor comment" (194). The individualized mode uses teacher-student conference as the primary method of instruction (194). But the most effective method of teaching writing, according to Hillocks, is the environmental mode, which uses group work but in a more structured way than the natural process teachers do, specifically "to engage students with each other in *specifiable* processes important to some *particular aspect* of writing" (122) (italics mine). Other compositionists echo Hillocks' findings, referencing studies that suggest that the retention rate for knowledge acquired from a lecture is weak (MacLeish in Foster 209). And we have all attended lectures at conferences wherein the lecturer discusses the ineffectuality of the lecture method.

Similarly, some writing teachers cast doubt on the efficacy of collaborative learning and writing. To be sure, the educational zeitgeist is that knowledge is socially constructed, and, consequently, there are more supporters than detractors of peer conferencing, collaborative learning, and collaborative writing. But even those who write in support of peer conferencing acknowledge its pitfalls (see Spear; Trimbur; Howard). Some students are reticent about sharing their work with their classmates; some students distrust the opinions of their classmates and prefer the authority of a teacher's feedback; peer group discussion too often begins with perfunctory praise about each other's work, then drifts into a heated exchange about whom Joe Millionaire should choose. Done right, advocates insist, the collaborative method is a most effective way of helping students learn to write. But it works better for some students than for others.

The one-on-one conference method, one teacher working with one student as she drafts and revises her paper, would seem an ideal way of improving writing skills, and certainly this method has enthusiastic advocates (Foster 198). An instructor using this method typically meets with each of her students several times throughout the term, sometimes as often as each week for fifteen or so minutes, the amount of time usually dictated by the number of students for whom the teacher is responsible. Usually the tutorial is spent discussing a paper the student is currently working on, the teacher asking questions and offering advice. Such individual attention helps convince students their teacher cares about their development as a writer and might help motivate students to do good work. This method also allows the teacher to intervene while the student is drafting and revising, so it validates the process approach to writing instruction. On the other hand, the interpersonal dynamics of this method can be counterproductive because the student and the teacher are not meeting as equals. The teacher is the expert reader/evaluator to whom the student brings her work. There is a danger that the teacher might exert too much control and usurp the student writer's voice (Foster 201). But some teachers are so convinced of the efficacy of this method that they are willing to sacrifice hours of class time to meet with each student individually. And most colleges support a writing center where a student can go and meet with a tutor and receive more feedback on a work in progress from an expert reader.

But no one method of teaching writing works well for all students; composition teachers need to have a big bag of pedagogical tricks. We know—from the work of learning style experts—that different students have different learning styles. Writing

teachers need to adopt an eclectic approach to teaching writing to accommodate the variety of learning styles students bring with them into the classroom.

The work of Anthony Gregorc, for example, illustrates the extent to which different learners perceive and organize knowledge in different ways. Some students see knowledge as concrete and tangible; others perceive knowledge as less tangible, more abstract. Some students feel compelled to organize knowledge sequentially if they are to learn effectively; others can learn while still preferring and appreciating the non-linear, random, unclassifiable nature of knowledge (Harrison). In Gregorc's taxonomy, there are four different learning styles: Concrete Sequential, Concrete Random, Abstract Sequential, and Abstract Random.

Concrete Sequential learners like teachers who lecture a lot because they learn best when an authority figure presents clear and specific information to them in a structured manner. They are passive but still efficient learners. A lecture can engage Concrete Randoms and Abstract Sequentials to an extent, the former because they appreciate tangible knowledge, the latter because they appreciate order and structure. But these are active learners who crave more variety, independent learners who prefer hands-on activites. A lecture does not engage Abstract Random learners. They are bored by and unresponsive to specific information presented to them in a well-structured manner by one person, needing instead the stimulation of others in a more informal context.

Concrete Sequential learners do not like group work. Devoted time managers, they find peer conferencing inefficient and prefer to have their work reviewed by their teachers not their classmates. Concrete Randoms generally enjoy and benefit from group work because they need readers to suggest to them accepted ways of structuring their

written work more effectively. As participants, they are great at suggesting to classmates alternate but still effective ways of structuring a writing assignment. Abstract Sequential learners generally do not benefit from group work because they tend to be naturally good writers, adept at transforming the abstract into the sequential, usually the very purpose of an academic writing assignment. But other group members benefit from the participation of Abstract Sequentials who are good at assessing the strengths and weaknesses of their peers' writing. Abstract Random learners enjoy group work the most, probably because they benefit the most from it. Their attention span lengthens when they are interacting with peers so they can heed the advice they are given more effectively than they can when listening to a lecture. They are also the best participants not only because they are so creative and perceptive, but also because they are sensitive and can convey suggestions and advice in a non-judgmental, non-threatening manner.

Concrete Sequential learners appreciate a one-on-one session with their teacher because it gives them the opportunity to clarify the nature of the assignment and to make sure they are efficiently meeting the needs and expectations of the person who will be evaluating their work. They are less eager to spend time with a tutor in the writing center. One-on-one instruction—with their teacher or with a writing-center tutor—is good for Concrete Randoms, who often need help shaping their ideas in a conventional way. Abstract Sequential learners are independent by nature and keen and able learners, and they rarely seek out individual help, unless they must. Abstract Randoms need one-on-one instruction the most. They enjoy personal attention and need it to focus and relate their ideas to their thesis and to present the ideas in a logical, coherent, structured way. They're great to work with on an individual basis because they make their teacher or

tutor feel needed; tutoring an Abstract Random can give a teacher a real sense of accomplishment.

Concrete Sequential learners don't appreciate the Socratic method. They want to hear the truth from the wise teacher; they don't want to be pushed and prodded into discovering it on their own. Concrete Randoms love the Socratic method and learn well from it. A question has substance yet usually elicits a varied response; it is delivered to the learner as a concrete entity but it can be unpacked in a variety of ways. Abstract Sequential learners also like the Socratic method and are adept at synthesizing an open-ended question's range of various answers. The Socratic Method is usually a whole-class activity and, as such, engages Abstract Sequential learners less effectively.

Concrete Sequential learners like to read and analyze exemplary models of the kind of writing their teacher wants them to produce. They will analyze and synthesize the structure and style of the model, its syntax, the word order of its sentences, so they can imitate it effectively. Concrete Randoms are by nature less attentive to form and structure so they need to exposure to model texts to remind them that readers appreciate a beginning, a middle, and an end. Abstract Sequentials read more for ideas than for form and structure. To them an exemplary reading does not so much model an imitable form as offer ideas and insights worth considering and perhaps integrating into their own work. Abstract Randoms would rather read a poem or a story than a model essay, but they need exposure to model compositions to help them learn how information can be, indeed must be, expressed and shaped in a way expected by the academic community.

The work of Howard Gardner also validates the need for an eclectic composition pedagogy. After studying, analyzing, and synthesizing much of the recent theory and

research in human intelligence, Gardner came to the conclusion that there are nine different manifestations of human intelligence: Musical, Spatial, Mathematical, Linguistic, Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, Kinesthetic, Naturalistic, and Existentialist (Campbell, Campbell, and Dickinson). These intelligences are more than knacks, aptitudes, or proclivities. An intelligence, in Gardner's system, is a cognitive touchstone we use to help us perceive, process, organize, and understand knowledge, in short to help us make sense of our world. Each intelligence Gardner has identified has its own site within the human brain. The extent to which a learner possesses or is deficient in a given intelligence can be measured. Learners typically possess all of the intelligences to some degree, but each person will typically be very strong in two or three intelligences, average in some, and weak in others (Feeser).

Students with strong verbal/linguistic intelligence can listen to and learn from a lecture. A lecture can also engage students with strong visual/spatial intelligence but only if the lecturer includes visual aids—charts, maps, pictures, film and video clips—in her presentation. Those high in interpersonal intelligence are expert empathizers, learners who try to and are good at understanding the perspective of others, so they, too, will try to attend to and learn from a lecture.

The interpersonally intelligent, however, work best in groups because they enjoy and are adept at working with others. A teacher should always try to make sure that each peer group includes a student high in interpersonal intelligence because such students encourage everyone to cooperate and stay on task. Because they are empathetic, they can accept criticism from others without feeling threatened, and they offer advice to other group members in a straightforward but diplomatic manner. The verbal/linguistic student

also does well in a group but is more adept at offering than receiving advice about ways to improve the draft of a writing assignment.

Students high in logical/mathematical intelligence prefer the Socratic method because they love to solve problems, to pose and respond to questions. They love to experiment. Hillocks describes a teacher who distributed a sea shell to each of his students and had the students describe the shell in writing. The class then had to identify each sea shell, based upon the written description their classmates provided. Such an exercise appeals to students high in logical/mathematical intelligence while, at the same time, reinforced the importance of detail and precision in writing. Students high in bodily/kinesthetic intelligence would also enjoy the sea shell exercise because they need tactile, hands-on experience to learn effectively.

Writing teachers can tailor reading and writing assignments to intelligence types (Feeser). The musically/rhythmically intelligent like to listen to, read, and write about music and love a multi-media assignment that allows them to include an audio component. Students high in bodily/kinesthetic intelligence like to read and write about sports, dance, anything that involves creative, coordinated movement. One writing teacher exploited a student's gift for mime by assigning a paper on that topic and by having the student, for a couple of extra points, demonstrate the art of mime to the rest of the class. Naturalistically intelligent students like to read and write about environmental issues and love it when a teacher sends them, journal in hand, into the woods to live and write like their hero, Henry David Thoreau.

The intrapersonally and the existentially intelligent are expert and natural journal writers, as well, because they love to reflect upon the significance of their personal

experiences. They are sensitive and intuitive, philosophical and reflective. They tend to prefer their own company to the company of others so they are not forceful participants in peer conferencing sessions. They prefer to seek out their own knowledge rather than have it presented to them so they don't learn particularly well from a lecture. They like silent reading and tend to be good natural writers, especially adept at the personal narrative, creative non-fiction, and poetry.

The work of Isabel Briggs Myers also confirms the value of an eclectic composition pedagogy. Myers believes there are sixteen personality types, each type being the product of a combination of four pairs of contrapuntal human traits. We are either introverts or extraverts; we experience the world directly through our five senses or we rely more on our intuition to guide us; we think things through before we act or we act on our feelings and emotions; we act decisively and expeditiously or we procrastinate until we a comfortable with each aspect and possible outcome of a problem. Hamlet, for example, was an INTP, introverted, intuitive yet analytical, a procrastinator. Claudius was an ESTJ, extraverted, practical, smart in a cold and manipulative way, decisive in a selfish way.

A learning style is associated with each personality type. Extraverts like working in groups while introverts do not. Sensing learners like to be active, hands-on participants in each aspect of a structured learning process while intuitive learners prefer to step back, listen, philosophize, and let the pig picture coalesce before them. Thinking learners like to apply the rules of logic to an issue, to debate, and to present an argument in writing. Feeling students value harmony and are the most effective peer conference participants because they can facilitate differences among group members. Judging students focus on

the essentials and get the assignment done quickly, even if they have to ignore nuances. Perceptive learners consider nuance and will delay action until they have looked at an issue from all sides, until they have heard from everyone.

Myers' work indicates that personality type significantly influences life decisions, the decision, for example, as to which career to pursue. Engineering students are far more likely to be intuitive, rational, and decisive than practical, emotional, and compliant (Myers 41) while finance and commerce students are more likely to be more extraverted and practical than introspective and creative (Myers 42). Myers' work reveals the extent to which personality types and, hence, learning styles, differ among students selecting different majors or professional schools. Consider the implications of this for teaching freshman composition. Freshman composition is a compulsory course at most colleges, and, consequently, the profile of a typical frosh comp class is going to be diverse, more diverse than most college classrooms are. As a rule, professors teach to groups of comparatively homogeneous students, who are likely to have similar interests and aptitudes and, hence, similar learning styles. They have—at least to a greater extent than we do—the luxury of limiting their number of teaching methods and of still being effective teachers. Freshman composition is the Academy's melting pot. We might have, in a class of twenty, a mix of business, engineering, humanities, social science, health science, fine arts students. Freshman writing teachers —moreso than their colleagues in other departments—need to recognize and respect the diverse ways of learning styles this array of students will utilize by practicing diverse ways of teaching.

Consider also the nature of writing as an academic discipline. Writing is a craft, a recursive cognitive process, and a social transaction. In a writing class, therefore, we

both impart knowledge, develop skills, and guide students through a process. Written composition is not only an academic discipline in its own right, but also one that teaches a process necessary for success in virtually every other academic discipline. It is, arguably, the most difficult subject to teach. To teach writing effectively, a teacher needs to use an array of methods because effective writing requires competence in such a wide variety of creative, social, and cognitive processes.

To make life easier for the writing teacher, should we segregate freshman composition courses according to interests or personality types or learning styles? There are advantages to doing so, and some universities do offer theme-based freshman writing courses. A writing teacher who focuses her freshman composition course on recent avant-garde movies will likely attract a class comprised mainly of introverted, intuitive, emotional, highly perceptive abstract random learners, high in visual and existential intelligence, and she will be able to tailor her teaching methods to her students learning styles and intelligence types. On the other hand, freshmen need to learn how to learn. Introverts and concrete sequentials should learn how to adapt their personality and learning style so they can participate productively in group work—they will have to do so often as undergraduates and, eventually, as professionals. For the same reason, learners who are by nature intuitive, emotional, and introspective should learn how to adapt their personality and learning style so they can listen to and learn from a lecture. Students share the responsibility of realizing the goals of a writing course, and to do so they must be prepared to stretch themselves beyond their learning comfort zones.

Writing teachers, similarly are charged with the responsibility of teaching **all** students—regardless of their personality, learning style or dominant intelligences—to

write competently. To discharge this responsibility, composition teachers need a variety of teaching strategies (see Beck for a complete taxonomy of teaching methods). Teachers need to lecture, facilitate group work, meet with their students alone, organize a debate, show a movie, arrange a field trip. No one method of teaching is likely to reach all students in a classroom as diverse in learning styles and intelligences as most freshman composition classes are. If writing teachers talk to each of their students alone and all of their students together; if they encourage students to write together and to write alone; if they teach students how to respond sensitively to each other's work and how to evaluate their own work independently; if they assign some topics and allow free choice for others; if they provide specific concrete instructions and encourage independent thinking; if they show movies, play music, ask questions, and present problems in need of solutions, they will connect with all their students and help all of them learn to write well.

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